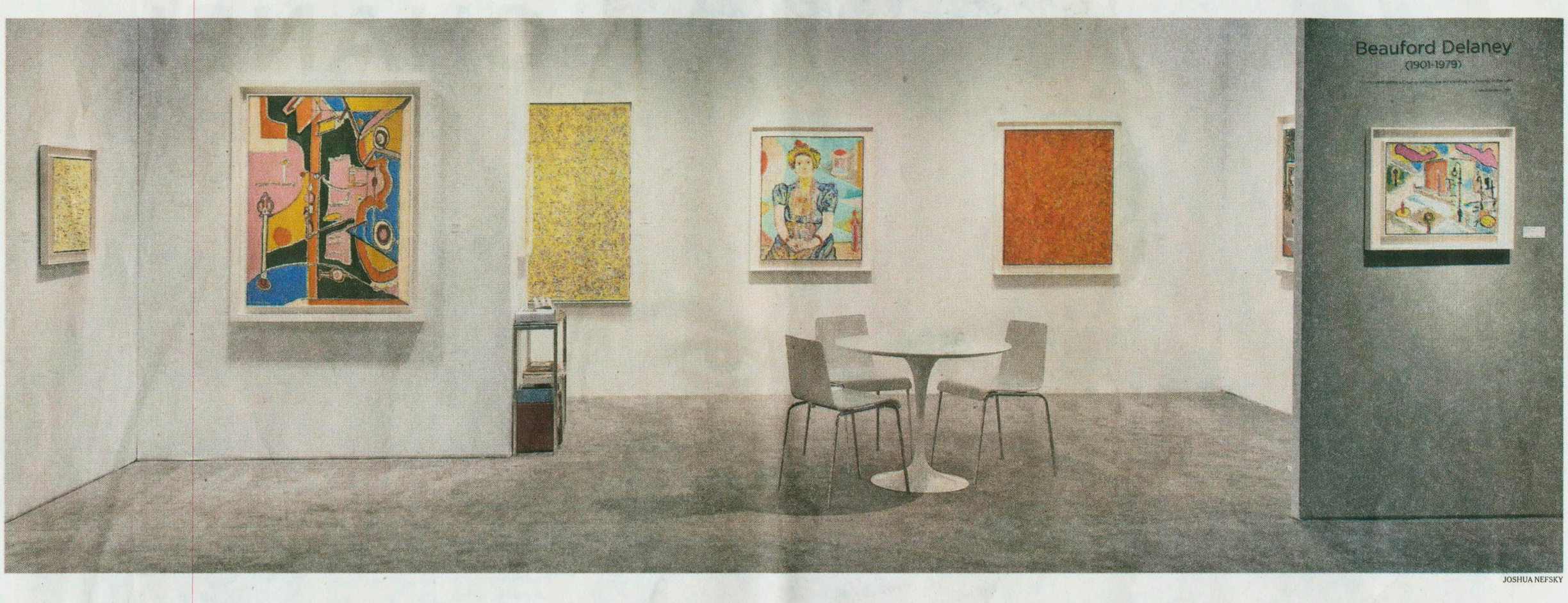


JOSHUA NEFSKY

Resurrecting Beauford Delaney

PARIS

Tennessee artist's fame lay largely forgotten in a Paris grave, until now

BY JAKE CIGAINERO

One of the most important African-American artists of the 20th century lay in an unmarked grave in Paris for 30 years.

Beauford Delaney's work from the 1930s to the 1970s spanned a range of styles, from naïf urban scenes and portraits to abstract. The Studio Museum of Harlem mounted a major retrospective in 1978, and his works were also shown in France at the Museum of Modern Art and at the École des Beaux-Arts.

Although never center stage, he was a darling of the international culture scene in New York and Paris. James Baldwin called him his "spiritual father." He was close friends with Henry Miller, who wrote about him, and Georgia O'Keefe, who painted his portrait.

But Delaney's star had faded long before his death in 1979 at a Paris mental hospital, at the age of 78. And he has remained largely unknown in his native Knoxville, Tenn.

This year, thanks to efforts on both sides of the Atlantic, Delaney's work is returning to the scene.

Monique Wells, an American expatriate who gives walking tours focused on famous African-Americans who lived in Paris, mounted an exhibition this year of more than 40 of Delaney's works from private collections. The show, at Columbia University's Paris campus, was a culmination of her efforts to preserve the artist's legacy in his adopted home by securing official recognition for several notable historical sites related to his life here.

The Knoxville Museum of Art is now looking at the possibility of an exhibition as part of a local initiative to bring Delaney's life and career to audiences in the artist's hometown.

Born in 1901, Delaney began working with Lloyd Branson, a Knoxville impressionist painter who saw talent in the young artist and took him under his wing when he was about 20 years old.

In 1923, Delaney left home for Boston, where he studied at several schools, including the Massachusetts Normal School and the South Boston School of Art. He made his way in 1929 to New York, where he floated between Greenwich Village and Harlem. With the city in the throes of the Great Depression, he supported himself with various small jobs while painting simple but earnest portraits, modernist interiors and urban street scenes often depicting the disenfranchised and downtrodden.

In 1953, at the age of 52, Delaney moved to Paris, where his friend, Baldwin, had already fallen into a steady rhythm of expat life. Settling in the Left Bank neighborhood of Montparnasse, an artists' enclave, Delaney, like Baldwin, relished a sense of freedom as a gay black man that he did not have in the United States.

In his new home, Delaney pivoted to colorful abstractionism in his work, a clear departure from the figurative expressionism he was known for.

His move to Paris came at a time when the power center of the art world was shifting to New York. His bold divergence in style derailed any momentum he had built with his Greenwich Street work and isolated him even more from the artistic community.

"He not only alienated himself from the art world at large, but also from the African-American community of artists," said Michael Rosenfeld, a New York gallerist who has been a dealer of Delaney's work for 25 years. "Delaney was making his own statement at a time when that wasn't expected. He was bold and pioneering and courageous to go against the grain of what was expected of an African-American artist."

Delaney found little commercial success in Paris and survived mostly on the generosity of friends and dedicated patrons. Existing mental health problems only intensified and, by the 1960s, his decline was fueled by heavy drinking and the onset of schizophrenia. A year after his Harlem retrospective, he was dead. Baldwin and other friends paid for his burial in the Thiais cemetery near Paris.

Ms. Wells, who has lived in Paris more than 20 years, was researching grave sites in 2009 for her tours and wanted to include Delaney, knowing only that he was a painter and mentor to Baldwin.

Richard Gibson, a friend of Delaney, gave Ms. Wells the location of his gravesite after a chance meeting. In his email with the information, Mr. Gibson asked, "Is Beauford still buried there?"

Mr. Gibson was referring to Delaney's burial "concession," a French system of leasing graves in which plots are rented for a period of time, after which bodies can be moved to a common grave if extension fees are not paid.

Unable to find his grave on her own with the coordinates, Ms. Wells enlisted the aid of cemetery attendants, who helped her pinpoint a ceramic flower arrangement with no name or other indication of who was interred there. Inquiring with the Paris cemetery system, Ms. Wells learned Delaney's concession had expired six years after his death, but his remains had not been exhumed in 1985 as they should have.

"It was a miracle he was even still in the ground," Ms. Wells said.

Ms. Wells raised money to renew the concession and install a proper tombstone. Delaney's grave has since been placed on the "celebrity" list in the Thiais cemetery, allowing his burial concession to stand in perpetuity.

Through her research tracing Delaney's life in Paris, she met collectors of his work and organized the exhibition. That show was attended by a delegation of Knoxville Art Museum staff and trustees. Stephen Wicks, the museum's director, had found Ms. Wells's blog about saving Delaney's grave and reached out to her about efforts in Knoxville.

After the Knoxville museum mounted a Beauford Delaney retrospective with loaned works in 2003, Mr. Wicks said it was clear the artist was a crucial missing piece in the museum's permanent collection. "I bemoaned the fact that we still hadn't acquired anything," he said.

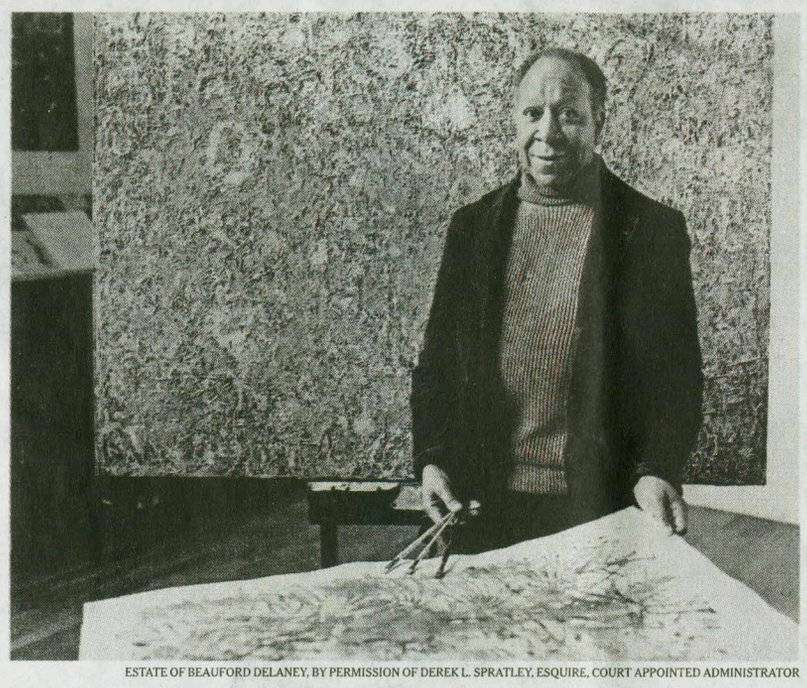
Growing market appreciation of Delaney's work has made it challenging for the Knoxville museum to afford it. Mr. Rosenfeld, the gallerist, said that as the value of works by contemporary African-American artists like Mark Bradford and Glenn Ligon has risen dramatically, so has interest in the 20th-century African-American vanguard like Delaney, Norman Lewis and Alma Thomas. Delaney canvases that sold for $6,000 in the early 1990s, he said, now reach $200,000.

The Knoxville museum acquired a couple of Delaney's watercolors in 2014 with donor funds, and last year it purchased its first Delaney oil canvas entitled "Scattered Light." This year, it added to its permanent collection a 1933 portrait of Delaney's mother, Delia, and another of his friend Dante Pavone. The museum agreed with Delaney's estate to not disclose prices.

In Paris, Ms. Wells has been able to install historical plaques at a hotel on the Rue d'Odessa, where Delaney first stayed, and around the corner on Rue de la Gaité marking what used to be Les Mille Colonnes, a cheap and cheerful restaurant frequented by the artist.

Mr. Wicks said the Knoxville initiative hoped to do the same in significant locations there, and is working with two other local institutions on a teaching module on Delaney for area public schools. "It would be great for young people here to view Beauford as East Tennessee's Picasso," he said.

COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY LLC, NEW YORK



ESTATE OF BEAUFORD DELANEY, BY PERMISSION OF DEREK L. SPRATLEY, ESQUIRE, COURT APPOINTED ADMINISTRATOR

A painter's return
From top, a solo exhibition this year of Beauford Delaney's works by the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York; Delaney's "The Time of Your Life" (1945), and a portrait of Delaney with some of his works in his studio on Rue Vercingétorix in Paris, taken around 1967.